

Simran



A Novel
By

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Excerpts

Light; it plays an incredible game of hide-and-seek with us.

The earliest memory of my childhood happens to be a very happy one – sitting on my grandfather’s lap, listening to stories of our mythology, of demons and gods, of good and evil and walking down with him to the library to catch up on the adventures of Mickey Mouse. I was almost never sure of how things would turn out as I grew, but I kept hoping that there was a higher meaning to what I was doing.

I can't explain it, but in the words of my grandfather, “*Life should never be led one day at a time because that’s not the way we were created. Our whole life is already scripted in us, and we just read the script and enact it out. Believe in the fact that you’re going to be great, and you will.*”

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Bright sunlight streamed in through the window; the wind made the clothes on the line sway to its rhythm; the sparse traffic out on the stony, pebbled road didn't make a sound as they passed, as if afraid they might wake up the dead; the people on the streets hunched over their mufflers, for the wind had a distinct chill in it, and hurried as fast as they could; the dogs lay in their kennels and cocked their ears whenever someone passed, but didn't make a sound; the clouds drifted lazily against an azure sky; the room was well-lit and well-heated, with the heater on full blast; my clothes lay in dirty heaps all over, just as they should; my wallet lay open at my feet, a ten-rupee note stuck under one of the feet of the chair; my rusty old typewriter was sitting on the table, with a sheet of paper, now old and yellowed with age and disuse, stuck in the roll; a bottle of water lay on its side, with the water trickling out through the loosely-closed lid, making a puddle by the bed; my pack of cigarettes stared at me through the glass, from inside the bookshelf, where they'd lain for the past twenty-four hours; my wet jeans hung from the door, and made its own puddle; the

lampshade in the corner of the room did its best to dry the wet socks adorning it; the clock ticked away the minutes of a perfectly normal day in my life. Perfectly normal, except for the gun.

It lay in my hands, and its weight acted like an emetic to my diseased brain. I sat crouched at the foot of the bed, holding my knees, grasping my knees tightly and weighing the gun in my hand. I rocked back and forth, trying to calm myself down. The tears didn't stop, and I did my best to be silent as I cried.

I saw the thin rivulet of blood flowing from my feet, where the sharp shards of the broken mirror had ingrained itself and left an indelible mark – the mirror that I'd broken when it reflected a happier me when I looked into it. The blood was trying to race my tears for speed, and I was fascinated by the contest. As I made up my mind and decided that I had to do what needed to be done, a strange thought struck me. It seemed a bit funny that this particular thought should come to me at a time like that, but then,

my whole life had been an oxymoron.

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I thought about what my grandfather had meant when he said those words. His ideologies were at best, vague. I've tried to decipher what he wanted to convey, but failed. He was the kind of man who took an active interest in trying to make me 'better' than what I was. I think he died a disappointed man.

He took my hand in his one day and said, "Do you know what we can do if we put our minds to it?" I didn't know. I said so.

"Miracles," he said with a glint in his eyes. I was twelve. I didn't understand a word. I just nodded.

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I put my gun down next to me and sat in front of the typewriter. I tried to ignore

the blood and the pain, and tried to move my hands to write something, but couldn't. Nothing came to mind.

There had been a time when I wasn't this miserable. I had some love left in me a long time ago. I had been in love, I had had a life, and I had cared for someone other than me. I had so many memories boiling in me right then and I didn't know what to focus on. I knew I was nearing the end of my life. Forty years had passed by and I had been a meek spectator, with nothing left to look forward to, and nothing left to say but sorry.

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The locals once called my town as *Namgyaldesh*, which means "Country of the Namgyals," after the ruling dynasty, but to the rest of the world, it's now called Ladakh. Roughly translated, it means "land of the high passes." Our house stood at the foot of a thirty-foot cliff, looking out onto a carpet of brown and

white – the sand and the snow. As far as the eye could see, there was nothingness, the view interrupted only by sparsely separated houses, much like my own, with smoke coming from the chimney throughout the year, and the rare game of cricket on the fields on the rare warm day, and the small pebbled streets that crisscrossed between the houses and connected to the main square where the day's produce was sold for a fair price. On the other side of the cliff, ran the shore of the Pangong Lake, which stood still and placid on most days. I used to skip stones on the lake, and get ten skips with nice, flat ones.

As I thought back on the days when I used to race my friends on the lakeshore and run to the market to fetch the new batch of potatoes and wheat for my mother, I felt good. I felt almost as if I were twelve again. I went through most of my childhood thinking that my name was *Papu*, because that was what everyone called me. I realized later that all young kids are called this. I was a bit disappointed – I preferred *Papu* over *Nihal*, any day. But, names, as they say, are like bad advice – we're stuck with it throughout our lives.

I am a bit hazy on the details of that bright winter morning of 1958, but that was when the lives of my family and me changed forever. My father was woken up early in the morning, and whisked away by three people wearing the clothes of the Indian Army – back then it was hauntingly similar to today’s terrorist outfits. I was in my room, behind the door, listening intently to what the *jawans* were telling my father. Apparently, they were force-recruiting any able-bodied man to fight for the nation, to defend ourselves from the encroaching *chutia* Pakistanis. I didn’t know what this word meant, but I guessed it was something really bad.

Anyway, they took my father away, giving him just enough time to explain the situation to me and my mother. Through her tears and cries of resistance, they led him away, into the waiting jeep, and as I stood outside the door, hugging my mother’s waist for support, watching the trail of dust kicked up by the jeep in the early twilight hours of that yet-to-be bright winter morning, I could hear the distant cracks and booms of the guns and the cries of men being slaughtered somewhere beyond the safe haven that I thought I

was a part of. It was then that I realized I was scared.

My grandfather came to live with us a few days later, and my mother was inconsolable all through. Neighbors came in to help her, and told her that their husbands were taken away too, and tried to fill her with courage, in vain.

“He’s fighting for our safety,” said the old and wrinkled woman who lived a mile away down the dirt road. “You should be proud of him.”

My mother cried harder. I was bordering on my tenth birthday, and I kept wondering if I was too young to understand. Now, forty years later, I understood – I was.